

Albert Mohler is a steady guide,
unremittingly clear-headed
—John Piper

CULTURE SHIFT

The Battle for the Moral Heart of America

R. ALBERT MOHLER JR

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Culture Shift

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“Understanding our culture is a matter of Christian responsibility. *Culture Shift* helps us to do that and do it well.”

—DANIEL L. AKIN, president, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, NC

CULTURE SHIFT

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PREFACE

Aristotle once described our challenge as the problem of a fish in water. Knowing nothing but life in the water, the fish never even realizes it is wet. This describes the situation of many Christians in America—they do not even know that they are wet.

We are swimming in one of the most complex and challenging cultural contexts ever experienced by the Christian church. Every day brings a confrontation with cultural messages, controversies, and products. We are bombarded with advertisements, entertainments, and the chatter of the culture all around us. We are Aristotle's fish.

How are Christians to remain faithful as we live in this culture? How should we think about so many of the crucial moral questions of our day?

These questions are not merely academic. They will eventually touch every church and every Christian family. Our homes are constantly invaded by the culture all around us. Our children are targeted by advertisers and the marketplace of ideas. Entertainment has become a constant—symbolized by the satellite dish, the iPod, and the smart phone. There is no place to hide.

Moreover, the pace at which our culture is changing has accelerated over the past several decades. Transformations in the law, government, social morality, and education have

accompanied the radical advances in technology and knowledge that mark our era. Like an earthquake that is caused when the tectonic plates on the earth's surface begin to shift, we are experiencing a seismic event in our culture.

How are Christians to think about these new cultural challenges? Some Christians prefer not to think seriously about these issues. This falls far short of an acceptable posture, however. Those who do not think seriously about how Christians should respond to these challenges will find that the dominant culture will simply pull them into its vortex. They will simply fail to live and think as Christians.

Others think they can somehow evade the culture. In reality, this is impossible. We may try to remove ourselves and our children from the culture, but the culture will find us. We use language, wear clothing, and engage as consumers in a world of continuous cultural invasion. The culture is a vast network of institutions, laws, customs, and language that is a constant part of our lives, like it or not.

Still others try to embrace the culture without reservation. This doesn't work either. An honest evaluation reveals that many of the most cherished assumptions of our culture are in direct conflict with the teachings of Christ. We cannot accept the idea that we are what we consume and possess. We cannot accept the denial of human dignity that underlies this culture's acceptance of the destruction of human life in the womb and in the laboratory. We cannot buy in to the cherished myth of autonomous individualism,

and we cannot compromise with a worldview based on the assumption that truth is relative or socially constructed.

At the same time, we remember that our Lord gave His church an evangelistic commission—to be witnesses of the gospel. Every single person we will try to reach with the gospel is embedded in some culture. Understanding the culture thus becomes a matter of evangelistic urgency.

Jesus was confronted one day by a lawyer who asked Him: “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” Jesus answered: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:36–40, ESV).

Jesus told that lawyer—and His own disciples—that our first priority is to love God with heart and soul and mind. Our second priority is to love our neighbor as ourselves. As the Lord said: “On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

In other words, the Christian life is summarized in these two commands. We must first understand our culture and its challenges because we are to be faithful followers of Christ and faithful witnesses to the gospel. We are called to faithfulness, and faithfulness requires that we be ready to think as Christians when confronted with the crucial issues of the day. This is all rooted in our love of God.

But Jesus also commanded love of neighbor, and Christians must be driven by love of neighbor as we confront the issues of our day. We care for the well-being of our neighbors, and we want to see them come to faith in Christ. We care about marriage, sexuality, children, the dignity of human life, and a host of related issues because we love God first, and this leads directly to love of our neighbor—and our neighborhood.

In the end, the culture and its challenges will pass away. But our Lord has left us here for a reason—as His people, we are to be salt and light in a dying world.

My hope is that these essays will assist you as you seek to be faithful to Christ as a concerned and intelligent Christian.

ENGAGING THE CITY OF MAN

Christian Faith and Politics

Over the last twenty years, evangelical Christians have been politically mobilized in an outpouring of moral concern and political engagement unprecedented since the crusade against slavery in the nineteenth century. Is this a good development? Given the issues now confronting our nation, the issue of political involvement emerges anew with urgency. To what extent should Christians be involved in the political process?

This question has troubled the Christian conscience for centuries. The emergence of the modern evangelical movement in the post–World War II era brought a renewed concern for engagement with the culture and the political process. The late Carl F. H. Henry addressed evangelicals

with a manifesto for Christian engagement in his landmark book *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*.¹ As Dr. Henry eloquently argued, disengagement from the critical issues of the day is not an option.

An evangelical theology for political participation must be grounded in the larger context of cultural engagement. As the Christian worldview makes clear, our ultimate concern must be the glory of God. When Scripture instructs us to love God and then to love our neighbor as ourselves, it thereby gives us a clear mandate for the right kind of cultural engagement.

We love our neighbor because we first love God. In His sovereignty, our Creator has put us within this cultural context in order that we may display His glory by preaching the gospel, confronting persons with God's truth, and serving as agents of salt and light in a dark and fallen world. In other words, love of God leads us to love our neighbor, and love of neighbor requires our participation in the culture and in the political process.

Writing as the Roman Empire fell, Augustine, the great bishop and theologian of the early church, made this case in his monumental work *The City of God*.² As Augustine ex-

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1. Carl F. H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of American Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003). Originally published in 1947.
 2. Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

plained, humanity is confronted by two cities—the City of God and the City of Man. The City of God is eternal and takes as its sole concern the greater glory of God. In the City of God, all things are ruled by God’s Word, and the perfect rule of God is the passion of all its citizens.

In the City of Man, however, the reality is very different. This city is filled with mixed passions, mixed allegiances, and compromised principles. Unlike the City of God, whose citizens are marked by unconditional obedience to the commands of God, citizens of the City of Man demonstrate deadly patterns of disobedience, even as they celebrate, claim their moral autonomy, and then revolt against the Creator.

Of course, we know that the City of God is eternal, even as the City of Man is passing. But this does not mean that the City of Man is ultimately unimportant, and it does not allow the church to forfeit its responsibility to love its citizens. Love of neighbor—grounded in our love for God—requires us to work for good in the City of Man, even as we set as our first priority the preaching of the gospel—the only means of bringing citizens of the City of Man into citizenship in the City of God.

Because of this, Christians bear important responsibilities in both cities. Even as we know that our ultimate citizenship is in heaven, and even as we set our sights on the glory of the City of God, we must work for good, justice, and righteousness in the City of Man. We do so, not merely

because we are commanded to love its citizens, but because we know that they are loved by the very God we serve.

From generation to generation, Christians often swing between two extremes, either ignoring the City of Man or considering it to be our main concern. A biblical balance establishes the fact that the City of Man is indeed passing and chastens us from believing that the City of Man and its realities can ever be of ultimate importance. Yet we also know that each of us is by God's own design a citizen, however temporarily, of the City of Man. When Jesus instructed that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves, He pointed His followers to the City of Man and gave us a clear assignment. The only alternatives that remain are obedience and disobedience to this call.

Love of neighbor for the sake of loving God is a profound political philosophy that strikes a balance between the disobedience of political disengagement and the idolatry of politics as our main priority. As evangelical Christians, we must engage in political action, not because we believe the conceit that politics is ultimate, but because we must obey our Redeemer when He commands us to love our neighbor. On the other hand, we are concerned for the culture, not because we believe that the culture is ultimate, but because we know that our neighbors must hear the gospel, even as we hope and strive for their good, peace, security, and well-being.

The kingdom of God is never up for a vote in any elec-

tion, and there are no polling places in the City of God. Nevertheless, it is by God's sovereignty that we are now confronted with these times, our current crucial issues of debate, and the decisions that are made in the political process. This is no time for silence or for shirking our responsibilities as Christian citizens. Ominous signs of moral collapse and cultural decay now appear on our contemporary horizon. A society ready to put the institution of marriage up for demolition and transformation is a society losing its most basic moral sense. A culture ready to treat human embryos as material for medical experimentation is a society turning its back on human dignity and the sacredness of human life.

Trouble in the City of Man is a call to action for the citizens of the City of God, and that call to action must involve political involvement as well. Christians may well be the last people who know the difference between the eternal and the temporal, the ultimate and the urgent. God's truth is eternal, and Christian convictions must be commitments of permanence. Political alliances and arrangements are, by definition, temporary and conditional. This is no time for America's Christians to confuse the City of Man with the City of God. At the same time, we can never be counted faithful in the City of God if we neglect our duty in the City of Man.



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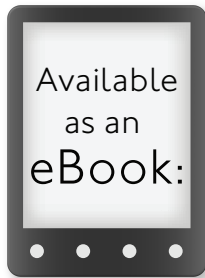
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